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Careers guidance and social mobility in UK higher education : practitioner perspectives

Christie, F

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Authors	Christie, F
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Careers guidance and social mobility in higher education

Fiona Christie

UALL Networks

conference

13th November 2014

Can careers advice and guidance in higher education contribute to social mobility?

Adviser perspectives

Keisha did not have the faith that she herself could be involved in that life and still pass the exams she was beginning to comprehend would be essential. Which comprehension arrived partly through the efforts of a **visiting careers officer**. Reader: keep up! A young woman, from Barbados, **new in the job, optimistic. Name unimportant**. She was especially impressed by Rodney taking him seriously and listening to him when he talked about the law. **Where Rodney Banks even got the idea of “the law” it was difficult to say. His mother was a dinner lady. His father drove a bus...** (NW, Zadie Smith, 2012, pp. 193-194)

Social mobility – the context

Setting the agenda



Private school pupils 'get better degrees and jobs'

Pupils from state schools are “significantly” less likely to graduate from university with a good degree and well-paid job than their privately-educated peers, according to new research.

News > Education

Society is becoming less equal, less just ... and higher education seems to be following suit

The English higher education system is going through a counter-revolution, writes **Peter Scott**

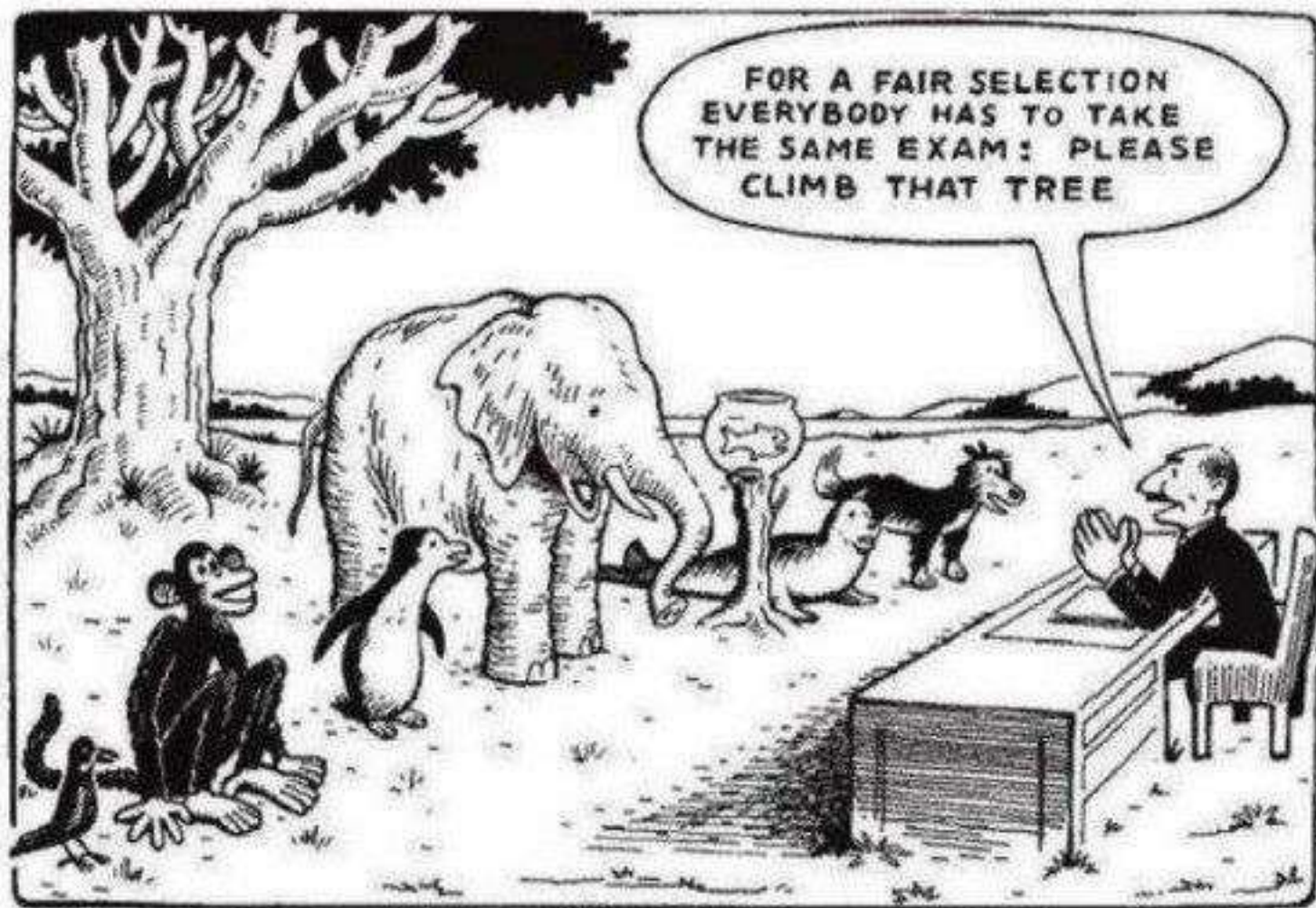
Graduates' job prospects depend on where they went to university... and Oxbridge students don't do as well as you'd think

- Study into how many graduates were in jobs six months after graduating
- Every ex-pupil of Royal Academy of Music was in work
- Derby and Northampton performed better than Oxford and Cambridge

By SARAH HARRIS

Without careers advice there is no fair access to professional careers

The Milburn Report makes important observations, but forgets about information, advice and guidance - one of the largest holes in the social mobility pipeline



Our Education System

<http://techmorf.com/category/pics/>

Careers education, information, advice and guidance in higher education (CEIAG) – the context

CEIAG in HE – some contextual issues

- CEIAG – enmeshed in employability drivers
- No universal benchmarks for careers provision
- QAA guidelines open to local interpretation
- Proving impact of services to university managers
- Careers advisers – struggle for identity and divided views on priorities
- Outside higher education – structural weakness in career development profession and services for young people
- Social mobility and careers guidance – focus has been on deficiencies pre-HE

Theoretical perspectives

Limitations and possibilities of careers guidance

- Sceptics of careers guidance; advisers just pawns in a system which reinforces inequality
- But career guidance theory and practice rejects this bleak picture – steering a path which champions individual agency but does not ignore structural barriers

The less positive labour market experience of graduates who did not take part in extracurricular activities, who remained in their parental home when they studied, and who did not develop the kind of social networks that provided them with **helpful careers advice**, and the extent to which such activities are more likely amongst particular disadvantaged groups presents a challenge to the prevailing notion that HE participation is a vehicle for social mobility and reducing the impact of prior disadvantage can be further entrenched by the very different HE experiences of those from more and less advantaged backgrounds. (Future Track Stage 4, Purcell et al., 2012, p. 132)

Insider research project (2013)

- Interviews with 10 individuals from 6 universities – from 3 Mission groups (Million+, Alliance, Russell Group)
- All advisers were guidance qualified (possible that advisers with other backgrounds may have different/additional perspectives)
- Questions addressed adviser experiences in relation to social mobility, approaches to practice, their beliefs re scope to positively influence students

The findings: adviser perspectives

What they witness?

- ‘The world isn't an equal place and it can come down to confidence.’



Why they do what they do?



4+2

41

4+0

39

29

30

31

32

8

27

26

25

Why they do what they do?

- **‘Our role is to shove open doors for them.’**
 - a conduit to trusted information
 - raising morale and building confidence
 - fostering independence (time limitations)
 - difficulty in evaluating careers guidance on its own (part of a much bigger picture)
 - a small part of the jigsaw (humility)
 - shared folklore of exasperation – fighting a discourse of derision

How their role is evolving?



BobMcal: Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0)

How their role is evolving?

- **‘It feels like what we were trained for isn’t what we do.’**
 - Changing role of advisers – move from depth to breadth (expanding repertoire/ intensification)
 - Reaching out rather than waiting for self-referral
 - Life coach, counsellor, teacher, trainer, event organiser, writer, researcher, careers encyclopaedia, receptionist and more
 - Pillars of practice hard to maintain (eg., being non-directive)

Where they work? How environment affects them?

- **‘We have moved into a numbers game.’**
 - Spectre of performativity
 - Increased numerical reach vs dilution of in-depth practice
 - Disparity of provision in different universities



NO ACT OF KINDNESS
NO MATTER HOW SMALL
IS EVER WASTED



Conclusions

- Unique viewpoint of social mobility – within and across institutions
- Strong professional community
- Belief in individual agency and that they can make a difference in supporting this
- Awareness of structural constraints for clients
- Intensification and expansion of their duties - informal learning is significant in enabling this
- Concern re. diminished resourcing for in-depth work
- Disparity of institutional provision for careers support
- Tensions between professional values and institutional priorities

Recommendations

- AGCAS to explore ways to develop a stronger evidence base with regard to career-related interventions, particularly with less advantaged students.
- AGCAS to conduct a survey of university careers services in order to better understand their resourcing and how this relates to the social backgrounds of students at different universities.
- Recognition needs to be given to how the role of careers advisers is evolving, and the changing skills and attributes required. It would be useful to re-visit what characterises their professional identity.
- The reality that one-to-one guidance holds lower priority to other responsibilities needs to be addressed if this is not to further shrink.
- There is a risk to the pipeline of qualified staff due to recent education policy which has reduced careers guidance in the pre-higher education sector. University managers need to be willing to support the training of new entrants.

Recommendations

- Any staff delivering CEIAG should have relevant training to a designated threshold in order to ensure quality of service.
- Continue to reach out to clients that would not volunteer for careers support by embedding career-related activity into programmes, and find ways for careers staff to work hand in hand with academics.
- Ensure high quality careers information about employers, occupations and labour markets is readily available for all. Marketing for university courses should be influenced by such content too.
- Universities should consider resourcing specialist careers advisory posts that have the objective to develop work for disadvantaged groups of students.

**Can careers advice and guidance
in higher education contribute to
social mobility???**

Yes...but could do better??